

general articles

MIGUEL ÁNGEL ASTURIAS AND THE APORIA OF POSTCOLONIAL GEOGRAPHY

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Asturias

**hombres
de maíz**

Mayanism

race

**capitalist
agriculture**

space

**territorializa-
tion**

In this essay we examine the relation between race and space in the Americas. We do so by offering a broadly postcolonial reading of the Mayanist writings of Miguel Ángel Asturias, the Guatemalan writer who won the 1967 Nobel Prize in literature. Specifically, we trace the ways in which his work problematizes the political relations between race and space and how, in turn, these relations problematize his own critical project. We argue that Asturias, in offering a trenchant critique of capitalist social relations and their articulation to practices of racism, fails to adequately address what we call the aporia of postcolonial geography. In so doing, he ends up reproducing the basic model of racialized territorialization that he attempts to attack. To analyse this problem we read the origins and transformations of his Mayanist work and its geographical tendencies over several decades. The major sources for our argument include the interdisciplinary field that we call 'Mayanism' and its relations to some of

Asturias's central works, including, most prominently, Hombres de maíz (1949), along with El problema social del indio (1923), Leyendas de Guatemala (1930), Asturias's Nobel Banquet Speech, and interviews with the author. In stumbling against the aporia of postcolonial geography, Asturias's writing is emblematic of a broader relation between race and space that frequently rises up to derail potentially liberationist discourses and geographies.

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From the map of Europe leaped Catholic countries, piling on top of his shoulders till they forced him to his knees.

Miguel Ángel Asturias (1993)

Joper el Niño, geographer and the ship's navigator, passed his tongue over his lips, in professorial fashion, before beginning to praise Geography, the science that permits us to know countries without ever having been to them.

'Forget about Geographies, Joper,' Pablo Figo raised his voice. 'I know India because I've read all about the crimes of England.'

Miguel Ángel Asturias (2000)

A central aim of postcolonial studies is to illuminate spaces that have engendered resistance to imperialism. But by necessity, this effort works not only *against*, but also *in* and *with*, existing spaces and geographies: a world mapped out precisely through colonial discourse. We refer to this condition as the *aporia of postcolonial geography*. It is widely recognized among postcolonialists that one cannot write histories of subaltern resistance without reference to colonial archives, languages, disciplinary effects, and themes (e.g. capitalism as driving force of history). Writing postcolonial histories is therefore never a purely autonomous or extra-colonial affair. Just as postcolonial historiography exposes the limits of rethinking the colonial present, so too must postcolonial geography contend with its aporia, which resides in the irreducible challenges that result when attempts to liberate the world from geographies of domination play out in and across spaces fashioned in the crucible of colonialism.

One of the principal valences of the aporia of postcolonial geography concerns the relation of *space* to *race*. If we understand race to be a set of theories and practices whose discursive effect is to naturalize perceived differences (physical, cultural, etc.) between social groups, then we must immediately recognize two ways in which race is eminently *geographical*. First, theories and practices of race always occur *somewhere* and extend through unequal relations of power; modern racial classifications derive

1 The 1802 version of Immanuel Kant's *physische Geographie* consolidates Kant's lecture manuscripts on geography that span some two decades, from 1759 to 1775. See Hartshorn, *The Nature of Geography* (1939).

2 The process of *ladinización* is an idea of subtle complexity, but ultimately has to do with *becoming non-indigenous*. Within processes of *ladinización* there exists a colour-coded hierarchy, with whiteness standing as a virtue. See Fischer and Brown (1996) for a good introduction to this topic.

3 This is the 'multiculturalist' reading of Asturias. For the most ideological reading in this direction, see Mario Roberto Morales's case for Asturias's 'mestizaje cultural democrático' (2000: xxiii) in his essays and notes from the *edición crítica* of Asturias's *Leyendas y cuentos*. Ariel Dorfman's (1993) famous reading of *Hombres de maíz* and Gerald Martin's (1996)

from the geo-epistemological space called Europe. Second, and more fundamentally, the segregationist practices that ground race work on the basis of a conception of the world in which each race is from *somewhere* in particular. In the treatise often considered to be the first scientific elaboration of race, Immanuel Kant (2000) reduced the human form to four basic types, each corresponding to a particular region of the globe (see also Bernasconi 2001). Such a world is thus ready to be subdivided into spaces that are occupied by different nations, each with its own native homeland. At least since Kant's lectures on *Geography* (1802), the concepts of race and nation have been premised upon a jigsaw-puzzle world, where every piece has its race and every race has its piece.¹ These imaginary pieces could be understood as *the becoming-spaces of race*. They are *becoming-spaces* because they are landscapes that must be discursively cleared and prepared for racializing practices to take hold. In a world of nation-states, they articulate to *state* spaces, spaces governed and defined through state power. Becoming-spaces of race mediate the process of *territorialization*, the state's insistent and iterative conversion of bare earth into territory.

Literary narrative often serves as a forum for the production of geographical imagination. Certain writers have taken the becoming-spaces of race and put them into play in ways that are notably original and provocative. Miguel Ángel Asturias (1899–1974), the first Latin American prose writer to win the Nobel Prize in literature, is one. As a young man in Guatemala he wrote a thesis advocating state-sponsored *ladinización* – race- and culture-mixing – as a means of saving the 'degenerate' Mayan Indians.² Then, in Paris, he became a scholar of the Maya – indeed, a Mayanist – and upon return to Guatemala, devoted himself to retelling Maya stories, standing as a key protagonist in making possible the speech of Guatemala's indigenous peoples. He would go on to write one of the great novels of the twentieth century, a forerunner of magic realism called *Hombres de maíz* (1949). In *Hombres de maíz*, the Maya emerge as the lead actors in a drama about national identity, territory, and the deepening of capitalist social relations. From eugenicist, to Mayanist, to magical realist, Asturias maps Guatemala as a space of difference, struggling to transform its place as a becoming-space of race. In this arc, and especially in *Hombres de maíz*, Asturias's confrontation with the aporia of postcolonial geography deserves careful reconsideration today.

Readers of Asturias tend to interpret his writing as a metaphor for America as a real or potential totality, an integrated cultural whole made up of a multiplicity of component parts.³ While we can confirm such a dream by turning to his interviews, his actual literary writing resists this reading. Far from describing the national space as a meeting ground for intercultural democracy, Asturias persistently challenges us with an impossibly fragmented and even hostile terrain. He was explicit in his desire to be critically

essays and footnotes to the same work lend themselves to this interpretation, although with greater attention to its subtleties and limitations.

geographical, telling the Nobel banquet that his work arose from ‘cataclysms that engendered a *geography of madness* ... Continents submerged in the sea, races castrated just as they surged to independence, and the fragmentation of the New World’ (1967, our emphasis). We understand his mapping of America as a traumatic and tenacious disarticulation, one riven with the violence of segregationist impulses that further complicate the relations between race, space and territorialization. It is within this problematic that we read his quintessential Mayanist work, *Hombres de maíz*. The novel’s critical edge is structured around and upon the aporia of postcolonial geography.

Asturias’s driving preoccupation is the destiny of Guatemala and its people. As he explained in one interview, ‘I am committed writer. But it’s to a reality and a world, which in this case are the reality and the people [orig. *pueblo*] of Guatemala’ (cited in Martin 1996: 477). Note how ‘world’ and ‘people’ align here. Asturias’s world-people – ‘Guatemala’ – is a historical-geographical effect of European territorialization which produced a certain space *qua* territory, eventually under the sway of a sovereign nation-state. The people bound by its borders and laws are, theoretically, ‘Guatemalans’. Of course, most of these people are politically and economically oppressed. To imagine a more just Guatemala, Asturias must do justice to its geography. He must inscribe *another* Guatemala, and in doing so, run the risk of repeating the unjust violence of its territorialization.

Hombres de maíz begins with its historico-spatial context undergoing an aggressive capitalist expansion, what is historically remembered as the ‘liberal reform’ of the late nineteenth century.⁴ The emissaries of this reform are the *maiceros*, landless peasants who slash and burn the forest to grow corn for profit. This context thus situates the fundamental conflict as determined by the intersecting vectors of identity, food and land. An early and key passage sets the scene. Just when an indigenous leader, Gaspar Ilóm, begins killing the encroaching *maiceros*, we are confronted with the following discussion:

The maizegrower sets fire to the brush and does for the timber in a matter of hours. And what timber. The most priceless of woods. ... Different if it was just to eat. It’s to make money. Different, too, if it was on their own account, but they go halves with the boss, and sometimes not even halves. The maize impoverishes the earth and makes no one rich. ... Sown to be eaten it is the sacred sustenance of the men who were made of maize. Sown to make money it means famine for the men who were made of maize. (Asturias 1993: 11)

Asturias here draws an organizing set of distinctions between the *maicero* (the ‘maizegrower’) and the *hombre de maíz* (the ‘man of maize’) for whom the novel is named. For the *maicero*, corn is a commodity produced as a

4 Even though the word ‘Guatemala’ never once appears in the novel, it is widely understood, including by Asturias himself, that the context of reference here is the territorialized nation called Guatemala.

5 The bibliography on the discourses of the Meso-American subject categorized as 'the Indian' (*el indio*) or 'the Maya' is too vast to detail here. By 'the Indian' we refer to the outcome of a historical trajectory of identification that depends upon a colonial gaze backed up by force: one that dialectically homogenizes (the monolithic Indian as racialized other and/or national essence) and produces difference (distinct indigenous communities). The Indian thus functions rhetorically as both emblem and social relation. We place the Indian in quotation marks here at the outset (and which will be implied henceforth) to gesture toward this complex history; in doing so we attempt to invoke the referential ambivalence of the Indian, at once indicating subjects and communities so (self-)defined, as well as the sociohistorical processes through which those subjects and communities enter into discourse.

6 Martin explains that Gaspar Ilóm is a mythical subject with a historical past. Historically, 'he has very concrete antecedents, given

means to an end; for the *hombre de maíz*, corn is at once means *and* end, part of an unbroken circle of life and culture in which the people of corn constitute themselves through the cultivation and consumption of corn. The *maicero* does not extract all the value that is generated from the destruction of the forest. The *hombre de maíz* integrates himself and his culture *with* the forest: his social relations are not premised upon alienation, they are not essentially capitalist. Thus, the first fundamental distinction between the indigenous farm system and mobile maizegrower is that, for the latter, it's 'to make money ... [and] they go halves with the boss and sometimes not even halves' (11). The *maicero*, in sum, is a peasant capitalist; the *hombre de maíz* is a precapitalist (or non-capitalist) 'Indian'.⁵ A second key distinction now arises. The *maicero* does not own the land that he uses, and he does not farm the land that he is from: he rents land from a landlord and moves frequently (9, 220). The *hombre de maíz* occupies traditional lands trans-historically. Asturias's precapitalist Indian, then, is put forth as the authentic and effective steward of the national space. Only through the Indian's vindication can the nation articulate properly with its territory.

Consider Gaspar Ilóm, the indigenous protagonist and best-known character of the novel, whose name resonates from the very first line.⁶ However marginal or fantastic his presence within the text after his preemptive death (see chapter 2), Gaspar Ilóm is coterminous with the metaphorical contours of the nation. If the itinerant *maicero* can only submit the nation to the environmental destruction and social relations of exploitation that he leaves in his wake, then the *hombre de maíz* stands as the earthy base of the national territory: he is *bound* to the land. The relation of binding between man and land is explicit in the extraordinary introduction to Gaspar Ilóm, at once a declaration of identity and a declaration of war:

Gaspar Ilóm shook his head from side to side. To deny, to grind the accusation of the earth where he lay sleeping with his reed mat, his shadow, and his woman, where he lay buried with his dead ones and his umbilicus, unable to free himself from a serpent of six hundred thousand coils of mud, moon, forests, rainstorms, mountains, birds, and echoes entwined around his body. ... Gaspar stretched himself out, curled himself in, and again shook his head from side to side to grind the accusation of the land, bound in sleep and in death by the snake of six hundred thousand coils of mud, moon, forests, rainstorms, mountains, lakes, birds, and echoes that pounded his bones until they turned to a black frijol paste dripping from the depths of the night. ... But how could he get away, how could he untie himself from the crops, from his woman, the children, the rancho; how could he break free of the friendly toil of the fields; how could he drag himself off to war with the half-flowered bean patch about his arms, the warm chayote tips around his neck, and his feet caught in the noose of the daily round? (Asturias 1993: 5–6)

that his historical basis is a cacique named *Gaspar Hijom*' (Martin 1996: 282 n. 2).

Bound to the land, Gaspar Ilóm is the land. Conversely, Asturias's *maicero* stands as the metonym of 'freed' peasant labour, which the liberal reform sought to liberate, mobilize and untie from settled communities. The *maicero* leads a social-cultural existence unbound from life itself, alienated from community and reduced to the production of a commodity: corn. In Asturias's geography, the space of the traditional and authentic nation is marked by the production of corn to be eaten, not sold. Corn is therefore neither strictly natural nor divine (though it is certainly these), but also cultural and material: corn *depends upon* man for its successful reproduction. The cultivation of corn is not only comparable to, it is *the same thing as*, the care for the life of the tribe, its children, its culture.

Pushing this trope to its limits, the *maicero* becomes a capitalist butcher, and, in a clever reversal of colonial discourse, is negatively opposed to the organic, life-giving cannibalism of the *hombre de maíz*. Much later in the novel, Nicho Aquino, a partially *ladinizado* indigenous mail-carrier in the process of rediscovering his indigeneity, is confronted by a spirit figure, a true *hombre de maíz*, the 'old man with black hands, hands the color of maize' (192). In a tremendous three-page recapitulation of the novel's basic existential and political arguments, the man with black hands explains that the act of eating is always an act of savagery, that civilized food does not exist, and that the cannibalism of corn-eating – men of maize eat, precisely, *maize* – is nothing less than a payment upon man's debt to the earth. The blood of man's children must replenish the earth that sustains man. Universal law itself is a cannibal – 'In the old days the law authorized a father to eat his children' – but not a killer – 'but it never went so far as to authorize him to murder them to sell their flesh' (192). To sell their maize is to sell their children: 'who would ever think of having children just to sell their flesh, to retail the flesh of their children in a butcher's shop' (ibid.). If the *hombre de maíz* must eat his children to ensure the survival of the tribe, then the *maicero* sells his children to turn a profit. The dramatic tension, the war, is on: the men of corn versus the profiteers of corn, precapitalist Indians against capitalist *ladinos*.

These organizing distinctions between the *maicero* and the *hombre de maíz* amount to an uncompromising critique of capitalist agriculture. Again: 'Sown to be eaten it [maize] is the sacred sustenance of the men who were made of maize. Sown to make money it means famine for the men who were made of maize' (11). It is the compunction to accrue capital that compels the capitalist ('el patrón') and pushes the *maicero* to clear the forests and plant corn for sale. This encroachment of capitalist social relations into the territory of the Indian threatens the indigenous world. Capitalism becomes nothing less than the meteor of genocide, and Gaspar Ilóm is therefore justified in his violence against it. As the negated purist at the heart of the nation – the authentic national space, *bare earth* prior to being territorialized –

Gaspar Ilóm's resistance even takes on a vital, biological quality. As precapitalist Indian, Gaspar Ilóm reflects his pure resistance in his pure race. As he makes love to la Pajosa Grande, we read: 'the spasm took them far beyond him, far beyond her, to where he ceased to be just himself and she ceased to be just herself, *to become species, tribe, a stream of sensations*' (10, our emphasis). The antagonist in his struggle will now be correspondingly racialized and also made into a kind of *species*. In one of the novel's few, explicit references to the *ladino* – Guatemala's privileged national subject and the Indian's other – the battle lines of the war itself are described in a spatial relation of racialized difference: 'Indians with rainwater eyes spied on the houses of the Ladinos from the mountains' (12). It is thus that in the opening pages, the novel's territorializing structure is established in the conversion of the 'bare earth' (8) of Gaspar Ilóm's naked existence into Indian territory: 'they spied ... *from the mountains*' (12, our emphasis). Why this particular model for imagining social conflict – precapitalist Maya Indians and capitalist *ladino* peasants? And what are its limits?

To begin, we must recall that it was in the cultural capital of Europe – Paris – that Asturias would come to understand his destiny as a specifically *American* writer. Moreover, this newfound writing identity meant recognizing oneself not merely as 'American', but also as a kind of representative for the margins of that space of otherness: narrative authenticity meant recognizing one's American writing self *as Indian* (see López Álvarez 1974: 80). But before his departure for Europe, Asturias had argued for a eugenic approach to Guatemala's 'Indian problem' in his first major text, a law thesis called *El problema social del indio* (1923). The Mayan Indian of the thesis was constructed as a kind of biopolitical deficit that retards the unfolding of the national spirit: 'The Indian represents a past civilization and the mestizo, or *ladino* as we call him, a future civilization' (Asturias 1977: 65). To recalibrate the Indian with the present, Asturias proposed that the 'Indian character' should be genetically overwhelmed: 'to solve the present problem of the Indian ... we need to transfuse new blood into his veins' (105). Guatemala's progress would be fomented through mass immigration from Europe and state-sponsored *mestizaje*. Having thus argued that saving the Maya required eliminating them, within two decades Asturias's literary works, with *Hombres de maíz* standing as the pinnacle achievement, seem to propose nothing less than the re-Indianization of the nation. This shift away from a bald eugenics toward an identity-oriented politics happens in Europe. It is not the voices of Maya people that propel Asturias's aesthetic and political conversion. The agents of transformation are his experiences in Europe, most dramatically, the Maya Room at the British Museum, his work with the prominent Mayanist Georges Raynaud at the Sorbonne, his translation (from the French) of the Mayan creation story, the *Popul Vuh*, in short, the Eurocentric study of the Maya.⁷ Asturias's discovery of

7 While Asturias's Parisian episode is well known, it suffers a curious and almost universal erasure when his Mayanism is under consideration. See, for example, Sáenz (1974: 46). On his work with Raynaud and his time at the British Museum, see López Álvarez (1974). The Maya were first colonized by the Spanish, but the most celebrated Mayanists were British, such as Thomas Gage, Lord Kingsborough, Frederick Catherwood, Alfred Maudslay and Thomas Gann. Many of the objects that Asturias saw at the British Museum would have been carried to London by Maudslay and Gann. On Victorian culture and the study of the Maya region, see Aguirre (2005).

Guatemala's authentic *national* identity rests not on Mayans but on *Mayanism*.

A discourse emerging within nineteenth-century European thought, Mayanism is concerned with discerning, defining and explaining the nature of the Maya as race and civilization.⁸ The 'discovery' of Maya ruins in Mesoamerica, coupled with the growing recognition in the nineteenth century that they were the work of 'American' nations, brought great numbers of European explorers, collectors and scientists to the region. This flood of studies and collections (by Asturias's day, the Maya were some of the most studied people in world) was especially provoked by the 'mystery' of the Maya, namely, the questions of how a great civilization could have emerged in the tropics – and then disappeared. Mayanist discourse emerged as a way of framing and explaining these questions. Asturias's participation in this discourse would serve as the bridge from his brash positivism to his trippy surrealism, spanning the way to his incipient magical realism.⁹ From eugenicist to indigenist, he moves from calling Mayan speech a sign of intellectual weakness to making it resonate with his new literary language. Attention to his Mayanism brings out the decisive political and ontological challenge that resonates throughout his literature, what we have called the aporia of postcolonial geography. The aporia plays out most explicitly around Asturias's desire to advance justice within the constitutive discord in the relation between territory, the nation and its other, that is, the Maya themselves.

It is with Gaspar Ilóm, vital from the narrative's first line forward, that Asturias recentres the nation at its margin. If we take into account the construction of a moribund Maya subject within Mayanism, then it follows that Asturias in effect *regenerates* the Indian with Gaspar Ilóm. Indeed, *Hombres de maíz* is something like the *re-Indianization* of Guatemala. How does this project unfold, and where does Asturias take it? Racially, he exerts a complex culturalist twist that is something like an impure purification. Spatially, this subtle move leaves him destined to reassert a kind of segregation.

The first half of the novel, famous for its relentlessly violent scenes of poetic justice, traces the legacy of the almost immediately assassinated Gaspar Ilóm (he dies at the end of the second chapter) as his revenge is visited upon enemy after enemy. Dismemberment, authorless bullets and, most of all, fire, as signs of indigenous rebellion, mark these chapters with a particular intensity. Gaspar Ilóm outlives his life, converted into the fire of justice, the rage of a violence that carries out indigenous vengeance in Indian territory, the land of Ilóm.

But if the Indian metaphysically regenerates in the form of fire – fire that clears and fertilizes the land so that a new maize crop may take root – Asturias also presents us with a parallel cast of more historical – less

8 On the idea of 'discourse' as we deploy it here, see Said (1978). On the specific discursive formation called 'Mayanism', see Wainwright (2003).

9 Compare the comments on the Latin American writer in Asturias's Nobel Banquet Address to Alejo Carpentier's (1994: 1–8) description of the 'marvelous real' in the same year that *Hombres de maíz* was published.

10 'Señor Tomás sighed. Vaca Manuela was tall, strong, lean-limbed and healthy. But like a she-mule. The curse was being fulfilled' (28). The figure of the mule ('como las mulas', 'like a she-mule') is a generic sign of the hybrid, which historically signifies the sterile offspring of two unlike species (e.g. a horse and an ass). This image was commonly mobilized in nineteenth-century race science. And yet another layer of interpretation: Martin points out the tendency in Asturias to associate fertility with precapitalist ideas of 'community', and infertility with capitalist individualism (Martin 1996: 309 n. 17), e.g. precisely the forces that tempt Tomás Machojón to abandon his indigenous community for the riches promised by the capitalist mode of production and its racial-cultural analogue found in *ladinización*.

11 The Zacatonés are pharmacists, the *ladinización* of the *curandero*, and are here precisely assassinated by a family associated with the *curandero*. They are also

mythical – characters, and through them traces a thread that surprisingly seems to confirm the Maya's *degeneration*. Images of the Maya in various states of decay, privation and treason abound. Recall that Gaspar Ilóm is a kind of purist: he stands as pure resistance, a metaphor emphasized in his commitment to traditional ways and, ultimately, to his *race* ('species, tribe, a stream of sensations'). Impurity, then, is the quality that distinguishes the capitalist forces that set themselves against Gaspar Ilóm. For example, the character that passes the poison to Gaspar Ilóm is a fellow Maya Indian. But in a rare explicit mention of *ladinización*, his indigeneity is said to be impure, corrupted:

Señor Tomás had formerly been one of Gaspar Ilóm's band. He was an Indian, but his wife, Vaca Manuela Machojón, had turned him into a Ladino. Ladino women have iguana's spittle, which hypnotizes men. . . . That was how Vaca Manuela won Señor Tomás for the maizegrowers. (Asturias 1993: 18)

Notably, the curse levelled against the couple is that of *sterility*.¹⁰ In a point surprisingly overlooked by critics, their treason against Gaspar Ilóm stands in metonymic relation to their treason to the tribe, the race, the *species*. A similarly transgressive *mestizaje* seems to be in play with the Zacatonés, who are wiped out by five indigenous warrior brothers.¹¹ Their genealogical line, however, persists, because a daughter, the *mestiza* María Tecún, will become the hopeful sign of a potential Maya renaissance in the story's final pages. The racializing thrust of Asturias's narrative, then, does not play out so much in terms of the purism of a race as species, but rather in terms of the biologically impure race as *pure culture*. Mayanness is not reducible to blood, but to a set of practices, maintained by the *mestiza* María Tecún and abandoned by the impure Indian Tomás Machojón.

While one might expect this dynamic to open toward the conventions of a reconciliatory, multiculturalist or 'democratic' narrative of national integration, Asturias leads us in quite the opposite direction. There are many steps along the way, but let us simply fast-forward to the end in order to see that even the apparently happy note on which the story concludes – the moving reunion between Goyo Yic and María Tecún – is a metaphor for disarticulation, as the Indian's return to productive family life can only happen by withdrawal from the nation and flight from the state. Their reunion leads them not forward toward a newly articulate nation, but rather back toward Indian territory, the highlands:

So back they went to Pisigüilito. Drive in the uprights again and build a bigger rancho, because their married children had many children and they all went their to live with them. Wealth of men, wealth of women, to have many children. Old folk, young folk, men and women, they all become ants after the harvest, to carry home the maize: ants, ants, ants, ants . . . (Asturias 1993: 306)

mestizos, which we can surmise by the attention paid to the un-Maya phenotypical description of their youngest daughter, María Tecún, the lone survivor of the massacre: ‘a freckled woman with reddish hair in long fleeing plaits, kind of tall, and skinny’ (99).

12 Much of contemporary Mayanism is structured around the word *milpa*. The concept was taken up from Nahuatl and distributed by the Spanish throughout Mesoamerica during the colonial period. Initially used to mean ‘maize fields’, by the 1920s *milpa* had come to refer to the Maya agricultural system as much as its place. Cook writes: ‘English and other European languages have had no recognized names for this primitive system of crop production which is general in hot countries ... Milpa agriculture would be a convenient designation, the native word “milpa” having been adopted by the Spanish-speaking people of Central America in the sense of a maize field, or a clearing in the forest, cut and burned for planting

Even with this cast of ‘impure’ characters (María Tecún’s *mestizaje*; Goyo Yic’s alcohol-induced *ladinización*) that, as is suggested, might suture the nation–territory disarticulation, the purism of Gaspar Ilóm remains: a Maya renaissance is premised not on potential national renewal via a new social contract but on the reclaiming of a mythical ‘land of Ilóm’, a land from which, as the thematic refrain of the first half of the novel repeats, ‘the war goes on’. The strict segregation of *Hombres de maíz* territorializes the Maya. Indeed, it does so at a particular site of production whose representation by Asturias depends upon a precise, even technical, name: the *milpa*.

Asturias’s rearticulations of space, territory and race coalesce at the site of the *milpa*, and it is there, we argue, that the strength of his critique of capitalism and racism most dramatically withers. To understand how, we need to reconsider his mapping of two competing modes of agricultural production.

Asturias ultimately locates his potential (future) Maya resistance in what he understands to be ancient Maya farming practices. With the staging of these practices (indeed, the novel begins [8] and ends [281] with their invocation) Asturias reiterates one of the fundamental themes of Mayanist discourse: that there is an essential site of authentic, precapitalist Maya culture. Within the terms of scientific Mayanism, this space is known as the Maya *milpa*.¹² More narrowly, Asturias will recapitulate a key shift in the Mayanist discourse on the *milpa* of the 1920s and 1930s.¹³ In most European accounts of Maya agriculture before the 1920s, the productivity of agriculture was not attributed to systematic, essentially Maya cultural practices. Rather, the agricultural abundance of Mesoamerican landscapes was attributed to nature itself. Indigenous forms of agriculture were said to bring forth nature’s spontaneous bounty. Where Maya agricultural practices were described by early Spanish missionaries, their discourse was not focused on defining the cultural traits or natural resources *per se*. For instance, in the 1841 translation of a report by Alonso de Escobar – a seventeenth-century Catholic priest who travelled through what is today eastern Guatemala and wrote an ‘Account of the province of Vera Paz in Guatemala’ – the prodigious bounty of nature is stressed:

On the north-west are the mountains of Chisec, anciently inhabited by the Indians now established in the Alcalá division of Cobán. In the same mountains the Indians of Cobán still grow their cotton and keep their plantations of achiote and cacao; *not that they plant or do much more than take advantage of the earth’s spontaneous production.* (Escobar 1841, our emphasis)

In such statements about nature and the Maya, there is no space for analysing the connection between the two, which are not, at this point,

maize.’ As an Aztec word, milpa is derived in Robelo’s *Diccionario de Aztequismos* from “milli”, a planting, and “pa”, in, with the remark: “Now applied only to maize.” The vocabulary of Brinton’s *Maya Chronicles* includes a verb “mulba”, “to congregate, to come together”, the possible connection being that all the people of a community usually work together in cutting and especially in planting a milpa’ (Cook 1919: 308). In conversations with Maya farmers in English or Spanish, Maya speakers tend to refer to cornfields as *milpas*, but this is often not the case when speaking in Maya languages.

13 This discussion draws on Wainwright (2003: ch. 3).

clearly differentiated phenomena. The line between the labour of the Maya and ‘their nature’ was not firmly drawn.

During the 1920s the dominant theory of the *milpa* underwent profound changes. In effect, the Mayanist discourse on Maya farming would reframe the Maya farm and farmer as an organically connected *system* that articulates Maya cultural practices with the land (or nature). Cook, in an influential 1919 article, ‘Milpa agriculture: a primitive tropical system’, for instance, is the first to explicitly define the Maya *milpa* system as a ‘system’. By mid-century, the Maya farm system has become a convention of Mayanism, as we see, for example, Lundell invoking the concept of ‘system’ throughout his important 1933 essay on ‘The agriculture of the Maya’ (e.g. p. 67 and *passim*). It is important to stress that, for these and other Mayanists, the Maya farm system is a system in so far as it is a *cultural* system, defined equally by its systematicity and its Mayanness. In these texts, whether one is examining *milpa* discourse concerning the ‘ancient’ or ‘modern’ Maya, the system is spoken of as constituted through cultural practices, defined in terms of *Maya* culture (e.g. Cook 1919; Lundell 1933; Kempton 1937; Morley 1946; Cowgill 1962). Notwithstanding the facts that ‘milpa’ is not a word from a Maya language, and that the steel machete which is said to be instrumental was introduced in the 1500s, Maya culture is transhistorically contained within, and produced through, the *milpa* system.

A notable feature of *Hombres de maíz*, when read in the context of Mayanism, is the way in which this piece of conventional wisdom about the tight bond between Maya identity and the *milpa* is converted into something like dogma. Recall that at the beginning of the novel the narrator explains that Gaspar Ilóm takes up the defence of Maya lands because the *maiceros* are destroying the forest, impoverishing the earth and bringing famine to the men of maize (9). Driving these processes are the expansion of capitalist social relations: the *maiceros* act as they do not on their own account, but in order to make money on someone else’s behalf. In a novel that is remarkable for its magical metaphors and surrealistic settings, it is striking to trace the way in which this conflict becomes a kind of frankly told morality tale, reiterated in straightforward fashion four more times. Musús explains to Colonel Godoy that ‘the maizegrower in the cold lands dies poor or dies murdered. The land is punishing them through the hands of the Indians. Why sow where the harvest is bad? If they’re maizegrowers, why don’t they go down to the coastlands? (72). In the midst of the war against Gaspar Ilóm’s men, this *ladino* soldier maps the correct racial geography of Guatemala: *ladinos* do not belong in the ‘cold lands’, the highlands – that is, Maya territory. Later, Benito Ramos repeats the lesson:

You should have seen what this land was like when they were cultivating it rationally. . . . Maize should be planted as they used to plant it, as they still do, to give the family its grub and not for business. . . . Now the Indians used to have all those things . . . in a small way, if you like, but they had all they needed, they weren't greedy like us because now, Hilario, *greed has become a way of life to us*. (Asturias 1993: 237, our emphasis)

Compare Benito's claim that all was well when the Indians 'were cultivating it rationally', systematically, with Asturias's stated source of inspiration for the novel: 'cataclysms that engendered a geography of madness'. The land–Maya articulation was a rational system; capitalism has broken this tie; today, the geography of the Americas is mad.

The same moral is repeated twice by Indian characters. First, the old man with black hands explains that producing maize as a commodity brings destruction: 'maize costs the sacrifice of the earth. . . . And what they're doing now is even more uncivilized, growing maize to sell it' (191). Later, in the novel's final pages, the Curer-Deer of Seven-Fires explains the divine justice exacted against the

maize growers [*sic*] who sow maize in order to profit from the harvests. Just as though men made their women pregnant to sell the flesh of their children, to trade the life of their flesh, with the blood of their blood, that's what the maizegrowers are like who sow, not to sustain themselves and support their families, but covetously, to make rich men of themselves. (Asturias 1993: 304)

Four characters, five passages, but one set of guiding truths: maize should not be commodified; the commodification of maize will impoverish the *ladinos* and eliminate the Maya – or, what is the same, will unravel the tie between the nation and its territory. Asturias thus draws a new, critical map, but one that remains governed by the becoming-spaces of race. By framing the capitalism–territory–Maya relation in this way, he impinges upon and limits the possibilities of other worlds that his narratives might open up. The dialogue between Nicho Aquino and the man with the black hands again proves symptomatic. Unable to see past the world-producing metaphysics of capitalism, Nicho Aquino asks, 'how can they clothe their families if they don't sell the maize?' (193). The man with the black hands responds:

Those that want to clothe their families work: only work clothes, not only families, *whole countries* [orig. *naciones*]. Only idlers go naked. They idle once the maizefield is sown, and they strip the maizefield to eat, to sell, to clothe their families, buy the medicines they need, and even entertainments with music and liquor. *If they planted maize, and ate of it, like the forefathers, and worked, it would be a different story*. (Asturias 1993: 193, our emphasis)

The solution – perhaps the only possible, imaginable solution – is to return to the purity of precapitalist indigenous livelihoods.

The figure of the Maya precapitalist farmer, his place in the world, his land – all these are constructed as interdependent and interlocking parts of a whole. Crucially, it is within the *milpa*, and *only there*, that they join, that the system works. The argument becomes a romantic Mayanism. But while *Hombres de maíz* is true to the discursive shifts within Mayanism, it is less true to the complexities of Guatemalan social relations. The driving dynamic of *Hombres de maíz* is established as the conflict between the indigenous *hombres de maíz* and the *ladino maiceros*, driven by capital (the boss) and the landlessness of the *maiceros*. If Asturias rigorously shaped the novel around Guatemalan social relations, however, the dynamic here would have to recognize that the very *maiceros* who are compelled to ‘waste away . . . in the midst of fertile lands’ given over to plantations of sugar cane, banana, cacao, coffee and wheat are *land-poor Maya peasants*. In other words, the *maiceros* are *hombres de maíz* – Mayas who have already been dispossessed of their lands.¹⁴ What Asturias’s literary Mayanism reveals is that Gaspar Ilóm and the precapitalist Mayas are defending their *milpa* lands from poor *ladino* peasants. *Hombres de maíz* thus frames the relations between race, space, culture and production in ways that cannot effectively problematize the complexity of Guatemala’s social classes, their inflections through racial discourse, and their historical–geographical conflicts. Indeed, his own lived experience that defined the novel’s conditions of possibility complicates the morality tale embedded within *Hombres de maíz*.

To the extent that Asturias’s critique of capitalism encourages a turn *toward* the maize *milpa*, it implies equally a turn away from the wheat-selling village store. For just as maize is treated as the source of life for the men of maize, wheat registers negatively. The *maiceros* are said to become poor by leaving their farms to go to work on banana and coffee plantations in western Guatemala in ‘in rich soil spattered with blood, and wheatfields ablaze beyond’ (11). For Asturias, like Diego Rivera, wheat was a genetic intrusion into American maize fields and therefore a fitting symbol of European imperialism.¹⁵

Trained as a Mayanist, Asturias desired to tell Maya stories, to translate their speech in a more universal mode. Yet as an urbane, bourgeois *ladino*, his opportunities to interact with the Maya were limited by social and geographic distances. How then did he collect the stories that comprised *Hombres de maíz*? The answer hinges on – wheat. His studies of the Maya were facilitated by his father’s trading business. Maya farmers came from rural villages to sell corn and buy sugar and flour (Harss and Dohmann 1967: 75). They often travelled to the town to trade, and would sometimes stay overnight in the Asturias compound before making the journey home. Harss and Dohmann explain:

14 On the primitive accumulation of Maya land in Guatemala, see Galeano (1967); Melville and Melville (1971); Handy (1984); McCreery (1994).

15 For Rivera’s treatment of wheat, see the *Capilla Riveriana* at the Universidad Autónoma Chapingo (Mexico’s national agricultural university), where maize and wheat stand in counterpoint as symbols of the American and European agricultural traditions. At least in Guatemala, wheat makes for a curious symbol of imperialism. True, it has partly displaced maize as a staple; but unlike bananas and coffee (the crop that spurred the liberal reform), wheat is not a plantation crop produced for export.

Asturias's father had become an *importer of sugar and flour, which he sold to the people who inhabited the surrounding countryside*. He held a constant open house to accommodate his clients, and the gatherings that took place in the courtyard at nightfall, under the trees, were an endless source of wonder and information for the young Asturias. . . . [Asturias recalls that 't]he buyers came in on their carts, or driving their mule teams. They arrived in the morning or the afternoon, did their marketing, then packed their loads to be ready to leave the next morning. They spent the night in the courtyard. . . . I heard them talking every night, telling their stories.' (Harss and Dohmann 1967: 75, our emphasis)¹⁶

16 The interview does not specify *wheat* flour, but it is a historical impossibility that the flour referred to would have been anything else. In the 1920s in rural Guatemala, Maya farmers grew corn and beans (principally) and sold the surplus to buy what they needed and couldn't produce themselves – machetes, sugar, wheat flour, etc. It is unclear exactly when the practice of purchasing corn masa ('maseca', which is not 'flour' [*harina*, *farina*] but could be confused as such) became common in Guatemala's cities, but it is unimaginable that rural Maya farmers would have driven mule teams to regional towns to buy maize flour during the first three decades of the twentieth century.

The symbolism here goes to the heart of the anthropological discourse that was Asturias's means of collecting Maya tales and expressions. Drawing upon the Parisian milieu of the surrealist revolution in order to push against the limits of scientific Mayanism, Asturias's literary project required a more intimate contact with the poetic cadence of rural Mayas that he felt reflected organic Maya culture. He could recall that there, in the courtyard of the compound, he chatted and listened to the stories of these *Maya* farmers engaged in capitalist social relations. The condition of possibility for *Hombres de maíz* is the marketplace where corn becomes a commodity. The son of a man who made a living selling *wheat flour* would write a novel celebrating his father's customers – as precapitalist men of *maize*.

Hemmed in by a racialized map of the world, Asturias's narrative cannot offer any kind of articulation between competing economies, between wheat and corn. Like Kant's seeds, Asturias's grains end up registering racially, returning, as race does, to the simplifications of segregation. While corn denotes a pure, indigenous way of life, wheat registers as the sign of Euro-*ladino* impurity. Race intrudes upon his social model, setting up pure spaces that cannot accommodate capitalist Mayas or *ladino* peasants who produce livelihoods in the traditional sector, outside of market dependence.

It is thus that his racialized critique of maize-capital relations clarifies the extent of his negotiation with the aporia of postcolonial geography. Beyond the territorializing move which we have discussed at length, two elements of the discourse about the commercialization of maize further mark these limits. First, Asturias emphasizes that poor *ladino maiceros* are stuck within an oppressive capitalist system, while the Maya live *outside* of (and under attack from) capitalism. Yet the Maya are not outside of capitalism. Indeed, the liberal reforms that provide the historical backdrop for both his life and his literary efforts were precisely intended to (and did) deepen already existing capitalist social relations in Maya communities. Unlike Marx, then, Asturias locates resistance to capitalism strictly *outside* of itself – not within capitalism as a mode of production, but *before* it, in what Marx would have called 'primitive communism', within that ensemble of ancient Maya social relations that was 'discovered' by Spain and eventually penetrated by

17 To be fair, in Asturias's day it was widely surmised that ancient Maya maize was 'sown and reaped [exactly as it is] today'. In this sense Asturias does not break with the predominant Mayanist discourse. He participated, in a poetic mode, in advancing the argument to stress the *value* of the *milpa*. It lay at the centre of 'this great [Maya] culture, alive in its roots, [which] must be included in the current dialogue of cultures – with its message of beauty, its human dimension, and its perennial rebirth' (Asturias 1973: 9).

capitalism. Second, Asturias treats the relation between the Maya and the land as both *essential* and *ahistorical*. As he would later write in the foreword to a coffee-table book on Mayan art: 'It was these civilizing gods that taught the inhabitants of the plateaus of Guatemala ... *to cultivate maize, exactly as it is sown and reaped today*' (Asturias 1973: 6).¹⁷ But Maya livelihoods are not ahistorical – willingly or not, they participate actively in the transformation of dominant modes of production: they sell surplus, and buy and eat wheat and sugar, when they can, as Asturias would have known from his experience in the courtyard. What is at stake here is a way of conceptualizing the subsistence practices of rural Maya communities: *Hombres de maíz* rigorously, too rigorously, separates historical categories – ancient and modern, subsistence and capitalist – in terms that ultimately derive not from Maya people but rather Mayanist narratives. These temporal distinctions place the Maya, again, outside of capitalism and inside of Guatemala. Since the historical terrain of their struggle for justice must emerge from the precapitalist *milpa*, the authentic spaces of Maya resistance are territorialized in advance – as potentially national land.

Asturias's critique of capitalism's entry into the *milpa* relations therefore naturalizes one particular race-space articulation: Mayas are maize, the marginal-yet-central people through which he imagines a rearticulated Guatemala. The organic Maya-land dyad (the same 'population-territory' link that guided his notorious law thesis) remains the exclusive, authentic basis for remaking Guatemala. For the time of Asturias's Maya is presented as a time already past, only viable within a system of production that is irrevocably obsolete: the man with the black hands can only look back, to the ancient practices of 'ancestors'. The time of the Maya, their essential cultural temporality, is a time of precapitalist seasonality and myth. All of this converges on the plane of space, with the Maya territorialized in precisely those spaces that have *always* stood in the Guatemalan imaginary as 'Indian territory'. Difficult mountains that provide a refuge from genocide, no-man's lands like the labyrinth in which Colonel Godoy and his men meet their fate, the highlands that Nicho Aquino must master, becoming increasingly, magically 'Indian' as he gains distance from the city: 'they say this Nichon turns into a coyote as he leaves *the town ... up there through the mountains*' (Asturias 1993: 166, our emphasis), reports Father Valentín. Through the mountains, Indian territory, the naturalized home at the very centre of Mayanist discourse, the space of the *milpa*.

The becoming-spaces for Guatemala's races are thus cleared. It remains only for each group to be placed within its territory. Like a powerful god, the hand of Asturias pretends to intervene in this world from outside of history. Expressing a desire born in the heart of Europe, articulating words accumulated where wheat and maize were traded, a magical tale of

resistance opens a space in history, only to place the Maya within their *milpa* on the margins of Guatemala.

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